



Power in resistance

literature:

rejecting muffled cries

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Die kenianische Literatin und Menschenrechtsaktivistin Philo Ikonya über die Kraft der Literatur im Kampf gegen Gewalt gegen Frauen, über literarische Aufrichtigkeit und über jene Räume, die sich Frauen in der Literatur erst aneignen müssen.

Literature is like the entire creation open to what it can be and achieve besides just being. What is written creatively has a life force which cannot be contained by shelf life. Words impact beyond paper or utterance. Literature is in general one of the most influential subjects in the world. Its power comes from the ability to relate to in different ways and at various levels. There is a way of writing about violence and carefully marking exit routes for it in resistance literature. Its art is not overridden by the message even when it rejects muffled cries making its message blunt.

The attitude of an author creates the tone of a written work which can make characters speak to those in power at other levels. Criticism and wit, humor can cause the so called big powers to laugh at themselves, to feel ashamed or to get angry.

Often times there is nothing that people who prefer raw power fear more

than words of power. This was so in traditional societies too. Then word was fantastic power. It could bless and absolve or curse and dissolve. It all depended on one's aim. Language is flexible.

No wonder then compassion and beauty arise out of words that expose the stink in violence and call for a different way. Violence loves to silence words. Literature contradicts that and can reason, evoke feelings and desires of breaking violence showing how and why it must be stopped. And that is a primary strategy against violence.

Writing that will impact calls for use of devices which include persuasion, logical reasoning and plain power of condemnation of that which exhibits inhumanity. Violence does. As Hannah Arendt explains in her essay on violence, it comes from power used as force. Literature is about creating room. Mood, tone, allegory, metaphors and other stylistic devices take away violence even from tragedy where catharsis is the real result of witnessing bleeding conflict.

There is Literature that moves in the mind like a scalpel in a surgeon's hand. Sometimes it gathers into movements. It is like a storm that leaves nothing indifferent in its wake. A male writer Sembene Ousmane of Senegal had it in his inspiration to not only have female characters but to take them from the realm of violence.

In Sembene's Bilal's Fourth Wife, Yacine is beaten up by Suliman. The writer gives a strong voice of protest to Yacine and she demands respectability. Sembene is calling for a revolution with regard to women's rights. There are other writers, particularly poets whose male gender disappears in their writing. Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo's role model was his Grandmother whom he believed was reincarnated in him as a diviner.

Literature has the power to woo one's mind, grasp it into thinking about what is read or written. Literature does not only play the rational keys of human nature. It has the power to trigger a reflective response with a wholeness that immerses the senses and mind into a form of continuity. Soporific literature is not the aim. To be awake with more than two eyes is what literature encourages. Some writers are prophetic.

Yet at other times it can succeed in using timeliness. This is strategy. Then it fits perfectly in the waves of the current affairs. Time to Say: No! A 2012 publication of PEN Austria came out soon after Malala Yousafzai was shot on her way to school. A call for resistance poems received an overwhelming global response on the internet. For in literature resistance power blooms and breeds beauty. It is a celebration of freedom.

Nothing can be so deeply moving and

mind-shaping as the reading of literature that gathers one through subject matter handled in a way that liberates one. Something happens to one when one reads a work that does not shy away from telling about violence as experienced. It hurts but it has promising beauty. It tears but its truth soothes. It should not be feared.

Some would cringe when a woman tells about violence she experienced in her own body in her own words. How fail to embrace the opening of such a spirit. In "I Know Why A Caged Bird Sings", Maya Angelou describes rape at the age of eight in a way that can only leave the most callous mind untouched. Strategies against violence include empowering women to express their lives in all situations. To write is one way and for Maya it meant she reclaimed her dignity and power. She was able to walk confidently in a terrible world. She lived in her books. They still have soul.

A reading of Harper Lee's "To Kill A Mocking Bird", on rape and racism, is said to influence lawyers to integrity. In individuals it has helped the revision of racial stereotypes. The measure of change is hard to track but the impact of the book is undoubtful. Should there not have been a bigger literary movement springing from books that say no to all forms of violence including that of racism? A book movement that becomes a kind of a living Gandhi?

In "A Freedom Song", a poem by Kenian author Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, a young girl, Atieno, works as a domestic hand for family relations. After mental and sexual abuse, she dies. The author told this writer in 2014 that she expected people not just to like her poem as they say they do, but to curb this kind of situations for girls and women. It is clear to me that when this is said by a woman the impact is strong. Women can voice violence powerfully.

I know that books open up spaces where one communes soul to soul. A reader sees and touches power and this can be harvested toward strategies against violence. For this is power that one can negotiate with, a power to be with and not over others or oneself. A power that can house broken limbs. Power that can make a hawk-eyed policy maker sleepless is in literature. A power that you can invoke and revoke. This is the open space of possibilities of creation, a kind of potency ready for actuality. They say the pen is mightier than the sword, this for me means that literature is more powerful than violence. Women from any part of the globe who are violated are inclined to hide their wounds. Those of soldiers are uplifted and decorated. Women soothe the wounds of men and gods. Literature is not literature without women just like democracy cannot be without people.

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EIN LIED DER FREIHEIT

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye
(England/Kenia)

Atieno wäscht das Geschirr,
Atieno rupft die Hühner,
Atieno steht früh auf,
macht sich ihr Bett in der Küche,
Atieno ist acht Jahre alt,
Atieno yo.

Weil sie das Kind meiner Schwester ist,
muss Atieno nichts bezahlen.
Während sie arbeitet, kann meine Frau sitzen
und an jedem sonnigen Tag nähen:
Mit ihrem Einkommen unterstütze ich
Atieno yo.

Atieno ist verschlagen und eifersüchtig,
gibt den Kindern ein schlechtes Beispiel,
seit sie diese beneidet, wie eine Schülerin
will sie ihre Kleider, Schuhe und Glasperlen,
Atieno ist zehn Jahre alt,
Atieno yo.

Nun begann meine Frau zu studieren,
Atieno hat weniger Freizeit.
Zahle ich ihr nicht Kost und Quartier und
meinen Kindern die Ausbildung,
entrichte für Partei und Gewerkschaft,
das alles wegen des Fortschritts:
Bist du nicht dankbar
Atieno yo?

Besucher brauchen viel Aufmerksamkeit,
besonders wenn ich in der Nacht arbeite.
Dieses Mädchen ist zu lang am Markt,
wer wird sie lehren, was sich gehört?
Atieno wurde vierzehn,
Atieno yo.

Atieno bekam ein Kind,
nun wissen wir, sie ist schlecht.
Dessen Überlebenschancen stehen fifty-fifty,
um das Leben zu wiederholen, das sie hatte
und im Verbluten nach der Geburt ein Ende fand.
Atieno yo.

Atieno ist bald ersetzt.
Fleisch und Zucker – mehr als sie
in ihrem kurzen Leben aß –
wurden für ihr Begräbnis verschwendet.
Atieno ist in die Herrlichkeit eingegangen.
Atieno yo.